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AUTHOR Witchel, Robert
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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly summarizes the literature relating to the counseling practicum experience, as well as reviews the development and basic principles of Gestalt therapy. A marriage between the Gestalt therapy approach and the counseling practicum is developed as follows: "Experiential learning, the here-and-now, I-and-thou, and integrating thinking and feeling are all aspects of Gestalt therapy and the counseling practicum." Two dialogues are presented as examples of using this supervision model in the practicum. The role of the supervisor is crucial to this supervision model and is explored. (Author)

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GESTALT THERAPY AND THE COUNSELING PRACTICUM:

A MARRIAGE

ROBERT WITCHEL, ED.D.
Counselor Education
The University of Florida

AMERICAN PERSONNEL AND GUIDANCE ASSOCIATION

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GESTALT THERAPY AND THE COUNSELING PRACTICUM:

A MARRIAGE

ROBERT WITCHEL, ED.D

I experience the counseling practicum as being the most pregnant and potent aspect of a counselor's preparation program. In this paper I want to explore the ways in which I utilize Gestalt theory and techniques in my role of a supervisor of practicum students. First, a brief overview of literature relating to the counseling practicum and a review of the major aspects of Gestalt therapy that relate to the topic of this paper.

The Counseling Practicum

The counseling practicum is described in the literature as the focal point for integrating theory and practice (Peters & Hansen, 1963; Shertzer & Stone, 1974), representing the major practical experience in a counselor's education (Pietrofesa, Leonard, & Van Hoose, 1971), and providing a learning situation which could facilitate the optimal growth of the counselor candidate (Peters & Hansen, 1963; Hansen & Baker, 1964). The value of practicum supervision is further supported when Pierce and Schauble (1970) say, "that the individual supervisor, whose direct responsibility is dealing with the student as a therapist, has the major potential for impact on the level of facilitative functioning of the counselor in training."

Gestalt Therapy

According to Enright (1970), Simkin (no date), Polster (1966), Wallen (1957), Naranjo (1968) and Petersen (1971) Gestalt therapy was developed by Frederick S. Perls out of three distinct sources and influences. These are psychoanalysis (Polster, 1966, 1967; Naranjo, 1968) particularly as modified by Wilhelm Reich's interpretations (Enright, 1970; Foulds, 1972; Naranjo, 1968), European Phenomenology-Existentialism (Enright, 1970; Foulds, 1972; Naranjo, 1968; Perls, 1966; Polster, 1966), and Gestalt psychology (Enright, 1970; Foulds, 1972; Naranjo, 1968; Wallen, 1957).

Some basic principles of Gestalt therapy include -

1. the here-and-now - paying attention to what is happening in the present, rather than the remembered past or anticipated future, is an encouraged aspect of Gestalt therapy. Being aware of my own here-and-now behavior (including body movement) offers me messages and knowledge about what I am doing, what I may want, and how I may be stopping myself from feeling better. When listening to counseling tapes (representing the past) there exists an important present experience of the counselor to pay attention to!

2. I-and-thou - Gestalt therapy involves the interaction of at least two persons - me and you. I pay attention to my awareness of me and how I experience you, and share this with you; hopefully, you will do the same with me. Together, by each of us saying and doing those things which are pertinent to out needs, we will discover new possibilities in our quest to know truth and be authentic human beings.

3. Whole person - Gestalt therapy recognizes that a person always works as a whole, rather than an entity split into dichotomies such as mind and body, and cannot be separated from the environment.

4. "It" and "I" language - This principle relates to the semantics of responsibility and involvement. My experience tells me that many persons (including myself at times) refer to their bodies, acts, and behaviors in the third person, "it" language, for example "it is trembling" (referring to the hand). I suggest to the person to change "it is trembling" to "I am trembling", which may allow him or her to identify more clearly with his/her trembling self, and assume responsibility for self. Changing "it" to "I" is one example of a Gestalt suggestion which allows me to more fully experience who I am and assume responsibility for myself. Foulds (1972, p. 51) describes a number of other possibilities for changing semantics.

5. No gossiping - As with other Gestalt principles, no gossiping is designed to promote confrontation and expression of feelings directly towards the person or part of self involved with the experienced feelings. If the person isn't present in the room, he or she could be placed in an empty chair (in fantasy) and addressed directly rather than gossiped about. This makes it easier for a person to complete unfinished business with another.

The Marriage

Experiential learning, the here-and-now, I-and-thou, and integrating thinking and feeling are all aspects of the Gestalt approach and the counseling practicum. The practicum is truely an experiential learning situation since it employs direct experience; and provides a here-and-now rather than there-and-then focus offered by other counseling courses. The practicum also provides I-and-thou relationships between the counselor and client, and the counselor and supervisor. I experience the Gestalt method as being a significant and appropriate process towards actualizing the potential of the counseling practicum experience.

I meet counseling students/persons I am to supervise in pretty much the same way I meet new clients. I notice their words, my perception of what the voice of their body movements is saying, and my inner experience of what it is like to be around him/her (excited, nervous, confortable, businesslike). I usually choose to share my experience with counselors since I beleive that this is a part of the counseling relationship it seems appropriate for the supervisory relationship. My experience is also all I have, and it is very important to me! My supervisee's clients may see and experience him/her as I do, so my experience of the counselor becomes valuable material to explore. The following dialogue presents such an exploration -

Me: You sure seem pretty restless - - Do you notice that about yourself?
Counselor: No, not until you pointed it out (restlessly).
Me: Do you know what that's about?
Counselor: Well, I'm not sure, I think it has to do with my - - well, my being a little afraid that I'm not going to be a good counselor.
Me: Would you like to try something that may help you out of your restlessness?
Counselor: O'kay (hesitantly).

Me: (move another chair near to us) Sit in this chair, look back at yourself in that chair and tell yourself how you are not going to be a good counselor.
Counselor: (looking at empty chair) You know as well as I do that you're not fit to help others - - how could you help anyone, look how afraid you are. Your clients will be able to see right through you and then what will you do?
Me: Now sit in this other chair and express what it's like for you to hear all that.
Counselor: (less restless) Well, I hear it all of the time, and I wish he'd leave me alone!
Me: Say "leave me alone" to him over there (pointing at the empty chair).
Counselor: "Leave me alone!"
Me: Again, louder!!
Counselor: "Leave me alone!!" - - "Leave me alone!!!" (said very loud and then he sits back and relaxes).
Me: Wow, it sure looked like that was something you needed to do.
Counselor: I feel better - - I want to be a good counselor and sometimes I feel like I may not be fit to be one.
Me: My guess is that when this other part of you begins to give you hell about how terrible you are, you won't be very effective with anyone. I know this to be true for me.
Counselor: That's right, because right now I feel like I could be a pretty good counselor if I give myself a chance (boastfully).
Me: Tell him that (pointing to the empty chair).
Counselor: "I can be a good counselor!!" That feels real good to say.
Me: You might change that sentence to "I feel good!"
Counselor: "I feel good", Yeh, I see the difference when I say "I".

And so we worked on something important to you, to me, and to your development as a counselor. Not only did you explore a part of you that was in conflict, you also personally experienced how I work as a counselor (rather than my just describing to you what I might do). You also seemed to work through this conflict, at least temporarily. This "uncertainty may appear again and again, and when it does we could once again meet it head-on. Eventually, you may discover that being "uncertain is o'kay, and you may also replace the "giving yourself hell" behavior with constructive ways toward learning from your uncertainties.

A part of the supervisory relationship is noticing what the counselor brings to our sessions (in addition to tapes) and explore this material together (as shown above). While listening to a tape of a client I might notice that the counselor seems to be confused or lost, so I'll stop the tape and possibly say -

Me: You seemed to be lost on the tape.
Counselor: Yeh, I didn't know what to do?
Me: Well, put her in the empty chair, and tell her "I don't know what to do with you."
Counselor: "I don't know what to do with you."
Me: Try telling her how you feel about her.
Counselor: I like you, but you make me real anrgy sometimes!
Me: Be real angry with her!
Counselor: I'm really angry with you!!! You say that your no good and have nothing to offer, and that confuses me because I think that you have a lot to offer (angrily).
Me: Did you know that you were that angry with her?

Counselor: No, I've really been holding that in.
Me: Well, if I were holding that much back from a person I'd be stuck and lost, too.

The counseling relationship is like all human relationships, in that there exists anger, avoidance, conflict, and love. A new counselor especially needs the opportunity to become aware of the unfinishedness he feels with a client, and when he expresses his unfinished feelings he can then be more effective with this person. He will become more authentic and effective as he discovers the possibilities in counseling.

The Supervisor

I beleive that the supervisory relationship is parallel to the counseling relationship; when I am actively involved with the counselor's growth and refuse to avoid the dynamics I experience when I'm with him/her, the chances of the counselor being this way with his own clients is greater. When viewed from this perspective the "person" of the counselor educator is crucial to a successful marriage between the counseling practicum and the Gestalt approach. I challenge practicum supervisors and other counselor educators to pull off your masks of "knowing what you would do in every hypothetical situation" with a client and begin to relate with the counselor candidate as a human being who has struggles and feelings and who strongly wants to develop as a person and counselor. If you want your supervisee's to be open, warm, and authentic with their clients then you must lead the way by being yourself warm and authentic in your relationships with counselor candidates. If you want your supervisee's to explore their own behavior with you, then you must show the way by being willing to explore yourself with him/her. The literature points out that you will probably have a greater impact on the degree of success of a counselor than any other part of his training. This further supports the need for you to develop an I-and-thou relationship in the here-and-now with your counseling students.

I have propsed a marriage between the methods of Gestalt therapy and the counseling practicum towards completing a musch needed gestalt with the counseling practicum experience.

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